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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: OPPOSITION DIALOGUE WITH EPRDF PROVIDES PATH TO DEMOCRATIC REFORM

REF: ADDIS ABABA 1400

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The political dialogue between the ruling EPRDF and opposition parties UEDF and OFDM yielded its first fruit on May 22: a joint public declaration on respect for the constitution and renewed space for peaceful political activity. The government, UEDF and OFDM also agreed on a joint commission to investigate political violence in the Oromiya region and plans for a joint visits to Oromiya and other areas. A separate dialogue has also been initiated with Lidetu Ayalew's UEDP-Medhin party, which withdrew from the CUD earlier this year. The EPRDF plans to offer a dialogue to the reconstituted CUDP soon do so. The next, critical phase of the dialogue with the UEDF and OFDM will focus on reform of key democratic institutions, including Parliament, the National Electoral Board (NEB) and the media.

Discussions will be supported by detailed comparative analyses funded and conducted by international donors, including the USG. Senior GOE officials have indicated that the GOE is prepared to implement many of the international community's recommendations for reform as part of its dialogue with the opposition. Bereket Simon, senior advisor to PM Meles, has also indicated the GOE's preference for talking with all opposition parties together, but opposition groups remain wary of each other. Comment: While the Diaspora calls for immediate aid cut-offs and confrontation with the EPRDF, supporting the current political dialogue, spearheaded by genuine opposition leaders resident in Ethiopia, provides the most promising and appropriate way for the international community to put Meles' commitments on democratization to the test. Most critically, doing so will nurture democracy and development by fostering a stable environment where political space can grow. Donors have recently made clear in their parallel dialogue with the EPRDF (reftel) that aid flows to Ethiopia will reflect progress on democratic governance. Finding a positive way to resolve the trial of CUD leaders and others will, of course, also play a critical role in lowering tensions and bolstering democracy in Ethiopia. End Summary.

Political Dialogue, Studies Set Reform Agenda

12. (SBU) Just two months after violent unrest rocked Ethiopia and well known leaders of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), leaders from the United Ethiopian Democratic Front (UEDF) and the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) made a leap of faith and began a structured dialogue with the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The opposition parties were represented by UEDF Chair Beyene Petros and Vice Chair Merera Gudina, as

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well as OFDM Chairman Bulcha Demeksa. Prime Minister Meles kicked off the dialogue on behalf of the EPRDF, but soon turned the reins over to senior advisor Bereket Simon and EPRDF parliamentary whip Shiferaw Jarso. Discussions moved slowly at first; simply agreeing on a detailed agenda consumed nearly two months. Much of the initial discussion focused on charges of ongoing repression in Oromiya during

February and March. Nonetheless, the negotiating agenda that emerged from the talks covered nearly the same elements as failed talks that included the CUD in September 2005:

-- Respect for the Rule of Law, Human Rights and the Constitution

-- Revision of Parliamentary procedures

-- Media Law and Code of Conduct, Freedom of the Press and State media

-- Reform of the National Electoral Board

-- Financing of Political Organizations

¶3. (SBU) In parallel to launching talks with the UEDF and OFDM, PM Meles publicly commissioned several studies comparing Ethiopia's democratic institutions with those of four developed democracies: the UK, Canada, Germany and India. He invited international donors to fund and carry out the studies, which would include comparisons between the four individual model countries with Ethiopia, as well as synthesize best practices from each. Meles stated publicly that he wanted Ethiopia's Parliament to operate at the level not of emerging democracies, but rather that of fully-established democracies in developed countries. Many

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donors were initially reluctant to participate in the projects, skeptical that the results would be used to plan reforms, or would even be disseminated beyond the EPRDF. A number of donor countries also argued that no progress could be made on democratization as long as senior CUD leaders were detained. Post eventually persuaded European donors to take the Prime Minister at his word and prepare the studies to support the dialogue process. At the same time, the agenda of the EPRDF-Opposition dialogue was arranged to allow time for the studies to be completed before discussions began on individual institutions.

Rule of Law Talks Focus on Unrest, Political Space

¶4. (SBU) Parties approached the first agenda item in the political dialogue with vastly different priorities. EPRDF representatives sought commitments from opposition parties to respect the constitution and engage in strictly peaceful, legal political activity. They argued that Oromo parties in particular, including both the OFDM and the Oromo National Congress (ONC), had been playing a double game: while publicly professing that they pursued only peaceful political tactics, the parties had at the same time incited their supporters and others toward violent unrest and called for ousting the government. The UEDF (which includes the ONC) and OFDM, for their part, claimed that their supporters were being harassed, beaten and imprisoned by EPRDF cadres and local government officials in rural areas. They demanded an end to the repression and permission to re-open party offices and to conduct normal political activities again. While these difficult discussions proceeded, Western diplomats including Charge Huddleston met separately on a regular basis with both sides and sought to foster understanding the compromise.

Agreement Improves Political Environment

¶5. (SBU) After more than two months of hard bargaining on this agenda item, the two sides conducted a joint press conference broadcast on State television and radio. They announced agreement on the following points, among others:

-- Respect the constitution;

-- Engage in only peaceful political activity;

-- Actively oppose violent and unconstitutional activities;

-- Facilitate peaceful political activity, including through the re-opening of party offices and visits to constituencies;

-- Appointment of a joint commission, with members from both

sides, to investigate reports of unrest and repression in Oromiya;

-- Joint visits to constituencies outside Addis to demonstrate tolerance

-- A joint study of constitutional provisions concerning local administration;

Several of these points are simply reiterations of existing laws and obligations, but in the context of post-election tensions and unrest they represent important, useful public commitments. The joint investigative commission constitutes a significant achievement for opposition leaders, since the presence of their own, hand-picked members should ensure a serious effort. The ability of the OFDM to re-open political offices and hold meetings would also be an important step forward.

16. (SBU) One potential complication for the UEDF, however, is that Ethiopian courts have ruled that Merera Gudina and his associates are no longer the legal leaders of the ONC; the courts instead recognized in March (?) a break-away faction led by Tolosa Tesfaye. The later group, which Merera charges was financed by the EPRDF, appears to command little loyalty among elected ONC officials or the general public. For now, Merera's Federal MPs operated as UEDF members, while Regional MPs are seated as "individuals" in Oromiya's parliament. Merera has not indicated what strategy he might pursue to re-establish a political entity.

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Next Phase: On to the Institutions

17. (SBU) While the initial phase of EPRDF-Opposition talks was crucial for re-building trust and re-opening political space in the short term, the next phase of discussions will focus on more permanent institutional reforms designed to strengthen the pillars of Ethiopian democracy. Progress here would likely be more tangible and have a more powerful impact on public confidence in the democratic process. Donor-produced studies in all areas are now ready or nearly so, and should pave the way for progress.

Parliamentary Rules: Strengthening Opposition's Voice

18. (SBU) A detailed study of Parliamentary rules of procedure and practices of the institution itself was completed in late January and distributed the following month to leaders of opposition parties. The study contains a number of hard-hitting recommendations on how the rules and practices of Ethiopia's Parliament should be changed to strengthen the voice and representation of opposition organizations. For example, the study proposes:

-- Naming a Deputy Speaker from an opposition party

-- Awarding some Standing Committee Chairmanships to opposition parties

-- A multi-party council to set the agenda and administer Parliament

-- Guaranteed time (e.g. biweekly) for debate of opposition items

-- Major debate annually on the government's overall legislative plans

-- "Question time" once a week where ministers must answer opposition MPs

-- Rights for opposition parties or MPs to offer amendments to bills or motions

-- Enlarging Standing Committees to allow more MPs to serve on them

19. (SBU) Opposition leaders have expressed real enthusiasm to post officers about the ambition of the study's

recommendations. Senior Advisor Bereket Simon told the Charge and other diplomats on May 26 that the GOE expected to implement many of the suggestions regardless of what transpired in the next phase of dialogue with the UEDF and OFDM. The Speaker of Parliament and the PM himself have also indicated previously to the Charge that they hoped to have consensus on modifications to parliamentary rules and practices prior to the legislative recess in July.

National Electoral Board: GOE Builds Capacity in Private

¶110. (SBU) A donor-funded study of the NEB completed by British consultant Hannah Roberts in March found that the NEB had been seriously under-staffed and under-funded during the 2005 election cycle. Equally alarming was the conclusion that the director of the NEB, an EPRDF loyalist, had basically withdrawn from any role in the organization as of November 2004, leaving the weak organization in the hands of board chairman Kemal Bedri and NEB deputy director Tesfaye Mengesha. The report suggested that the rest of the NEB board had had little or no involvement in the organization before, during or after the elections. The report recommended that the board be made fully accountable to an active board, rather than to Parliament as it is now. It did not discuss how the board should be appointed. NEB staff often lacked the skills for the positions they occupied and electoral operations at the local level relied heavily on poorly trained temporary workers from other GOE agencies, especially the Ministry of Agriculture. The consultant's report was prepared with the full cooperation and candid assessments of current NEB staff, and has not been

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disseminated by the GOE to opposition parties or the public.

¶111. (SBU) Nonetheless, in March NEB Chair Kemal Bedri told donor represeZi/QFTk plan for addressing weaknesses before "politicians" became directly involved. In November 2005, Parliament approved PM Meles' request to extend the mandate of the current NEB board until June 2006, by which time he expected the organization to have addressed weaknesses revealed by May 2005 national elections. Kemal told donor reps, however, that fixing the NEB would likely take the rest of 2006 and hinted that the existing board's mandated might again be extended to complete the project.

¶112. (SBU) The agenda of EPRDF talks with the UEDF and OFDM includes an item entitled "Instituting a new Electoral Board in accordance with the law." On this point, the EPRDF has apparently agreed to a significantly broader discussion that it would accept with (now jailed) CUD leaders in September 2005. Other sub-items include NEB staffing at the local level and the conduct of local elections expected in 2007. Ethiopian law already calls for board members, who are appointed by Parliament upon a recommendation for the PM, to be independent of political parties. Intra-party discussions of how to guarantee that board members are truly independent will be crucial to re-building shattered public confidence in the electoral process. As the Roberts report indicated, however, issues of institutional capacity will be as crucial to facilitating free and fair elections as the naming of an impartial board.

Media Reform: Freedom and Responsibility

¶113. (SBU) The crackdown on media following the November 2005 riots, including the arrest of a large number of Amharic language tabloid journalists, ended a period of significant press freedom in Ethiopia. While local and international media watchdogs have decried the arrests and other practical restrictions on the press, the GOE has charged that many media outlets' irresponsibility and calculated subversion contributed materially to street violence in November. PM Meles issued repeated calls for donors to fund a comparative study of legal frameworks governing the press in the same four target countries. USAID ultimately agreed to fund the study, which should be available the week of May 29.

¶114. (SBU) The political dialogue agenda on the media includes three elements:

-- creation of a unitary press law

-- respect for freedom of the press as well as for the law

-- ensuring that state media operated according to the law
and "entertains the views of others"

In addition to discussions within the context of the EPRDF-Opposition dialogue, PM Meles told Parliament in March that a broad debate on the media would be held in the chamber and would include the views of all stakeholders.

What about the CUDP?

¶ 115. (SBU) The EPRDF is likely to invite the leaders of the re-formed Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP) to initiate a similar dialogue within the next two weeks. PM Meles told Charge that the CUDP's decision to walk out on the appointment of an interim government for Addis Ababa -- after the PM had repeatedly extended the legislative deadline to facilitate a CUDP take-over of the capital -- had demonstrated that the new party "had no principles." Nonetheless, senior advisor Bereket Simon told the Charge on May 30 that the dialogue with the CUDP would begin soon. (Comment: The CUDP's recent denunciation of the formation of the Diaspora-dominated "Alliance for Freedom and Democracy" might have helped restore the Ethiopian-based CUDP's reputation in EPRDF eyes. End Comment.) Bereket also told Charge and other diplomats that the EPRDF would prefer to conduct the next phase of dialogue -- focusing on

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institutions -- with a joint group of opposition leaders, rather than holding three separate discussions. He expressed regret that some opposition leaders, particularly Beyene Petros, did not want joint discussions. Charge said she would encourage the leaders to accept joint talks.

¶ 116. (SBU) The EPRDF has began a dialogue with Lidetu Ayalew's UEDP-Medhin party; post does not yet have details on those

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discussions. Although part of the CUD prior to Nove=QNPalogue Puts Meles' Commitments to the Test

¶ 117. (SBU) The announcement of the first agreement to come out of EPRDF-Opposition talks this past week was overshadowed to some extent by the announcement of a new "Alliance for Freedom and Democracy (AFD)" by opposition leaders in exile (septel). The ongoing trial of jailed CUD leaders has also claimed more of the public's attention than largely-behind-the-scenes political dialogue. Nonetheless, the ongoing dialogue between the opposition leaders operating in Ethiopia and the ruling party provides the clearest, most promising path to lasting progress on democratization. The agenda of the talks directly addresses the fundamental challenge of strengthening the country's democratic institutions, and is very similar to the agenda that jailed CUD sought through their ill-fated strategy of a legislative boycott and civil disobedience. The advantage of the current dialogue is that an insecure ruling party now has counterparts that have clearly demonstrated their credentials as a "loyal opposition," opening the way for the EPRDF to make concessions without appearing to give in to pressure.

¶ 118. (SBU) Will the EPRDF agree to meaningful reforms that could level the political playing field in Ethiopia? Despite the ruling party's dubious history of undermining its opposition, there are now indications that for whatever reason -- statesmanship, legacy or political pressure -- PM Meles is prepared to allow significantly freer democratic competition and stronger institutions. Ethiopia would not be in a position to make progress on opening real political and economic space over the coming year if donors had accepted Diaspora calls for immediate aid cut-offs and confrontation with the EPRDF. Encouraging and respecting the current political dialogue, spear-headed by genuine opposition leaders resident in Ethiopia, provides the most promising and appropriate way for the international community to put Meles' commitments on democratization to the test. Donors' have recently made clear in their parallel dialogue with the EPRDF (reftel) that aid flows to Ethiopia will reflect progress on democratic governance.

¶19. (SBU) We will want to monitor the EPRDF's commitments against some benchmarks for progress. It would reasonable to expect the political dialogue to result in multi-party agreements on key reforms of Parliamentary procedures, the media and the National Electoral Board during the second half of 2006. Amendment of Parliamentary rules and practices could come as early as July, and would provide an important boost to public confidence in Ethiopia's legislature. Finding a positive way to resolve the trial of CUD leaders and others will, of course, also play a critical role in lowering tensions and bolstering democracy in Ethiopia.

HUDDLESTON